

White Paper Report

Report ID: 99624

Application Number: PF5002810

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Institution: University of Delaware

Reporting Period: 9/1/2010-7/31/2011

Report Due: 10/31/2011

Date Submitted: 8/10/2011

White Paper

Project Title: University of Delaware Museums:
Planning for Consolidated and Sustainable Collections

Project Director: Dr. Janis Angela Tomlinson
Grantee Institution: University of Delaware

Funded by: NEH Sustaining Cultural Collections

Date of Report Submission: August 10, 2011

The University Museums of the University of Delaware has responsibility for an art collection of more than 12,000 objects that contribute significantly to the teaching, research, and service mission of the University. Highlights of the collection are paintings of the Brandywine school, 20th century photography, African American art, and pre-Columbian ceramics. The main collections storage areas and exhibition spaces are in two buildings, Old College and Mechanical Hall. The collections, and exhibitions drawn from them, are used regularly by faculty in teaching courses in Art History, Art, Anthropology, English, History as well as First-year seminars and writing courses. The University Museums also oversees the Mineralogical Museum, whose curator is a member of the Museums staff. This project did not encompass that collection.

Because of history of the collections, each was assigned to a specific building: the traditional art history survey collection is housed in Old College; the more recently formed collection of African American art is housed in Mechanical Hall. Following the recommendation of Conservation Assessment Program (CAP) review of Old College (2009), University Museums applied to NEH for funding that would allow the authors of the CAP review to return to the University to undertake a review of space usage in both buildings. Far more than a consultancy, this project would also enable two internationally recognized experts on environmental management and collections conservation – Michael C. Henry and Wendy Claire Jessup - to work with an interdisciplinary team of museums staff, and students and faculty. Together, they examined the environmental systems, building envelopes and collections storage needed to develop a comprehensive space allocation plan for museums spaces in Old College and Mechanical Hall. The project gave very practical experience to future conservators in the University's internationally renowned Art Conservation program.

The outcome is a plan for re-alignment of existing museum uses and spaces in order to realize improvements in energy consumption, environmental conditions for collections, staff efficiency and space utilization in Mechanical Hall and Old College. The re-allocation of space usage will increase operational efficiencies, and expand and improve storage space for the University Museums collections. The end result will be the optimal cost-effective and long-term use of the Museums spaces and a sustainable solution to ensure the best possible preservation of the University of Delaware art collections.

Project schedule and activities

The grant funded a nine-month project, from September 1, 2010 to June 30, 2011. (A one month extension was granted to allow the consultants to complete the final report). The point of departure for this project was a meeting on August 20, 2010, that brought together consultants, the chair and faculty from both the undergraduate Art Conservation Program and the graduate WUDPAC, and the director and staff of the University Museums (Janis Tomlinson; Julie McGee). The outcome of the meeting was a schedule of three site visits to take place from October 2010 to May 2011 that would ensure involvement of students, availability of consultants, and a timely conclusion to the project.

First site visit: 12-13 October 2010

Consultants Wendy Jessup and Michael Henry visited the University Museums of the University of Delaware to collect building condition data and provide an overview to undergraduates and independent study students on how to collect data for conducting a building assessment for collections preservation. Prior to this visit, the consultants had reviewed documentation as well as monitoring data for the two buildings involved in the project (Mechanical Hall and Old College) and also created an individual room form for capturing the data.

After meeting with the Director/Principal Investigator on October 12 to discuss the schedule for the site visit, the consultants used the balance of the day to collect information about all spaces in Mechanical Hall including the galleries, print study room, collection storage area, preparation workshop, and adjacent corridors, closets and support spaces. The second floor offices were not included in the review.

At the conclusion of day one, the consultants reviewed the collected data and prepared for working with U.D. undergraduates and independent study students the following day. On day two, Jessup and Henry presented to students, faculty and Museums staff an introduction to the project and discussed how to assess building conditions for collections preservation. Students were then given an opportunity to collect information about, assess and present their observations about the collections storage area in Old College. At the end of the visit, the consultants met with the project director to discuss questions that had arisen as well as progress made.

Second site visit: 24-25 January 2011

The second visit began with a meeting of the consultants with key staff from the University Museums to report on progress to date and plans for this visit, focused on an assessment of collections vulnerabilities and the collection of accurate data on all storage spaces (Jessup, Art Conservation faculty and students, Museums staff and a graduate research assistant from Art History); as well as a review of an environmental data analysis with Museums staff (Henry). After the meeting, the students spent two days collecting information about collections storage requirements, including: optimal storage types (i.e. drawers, shelves, etc.); requirements based upon existing conditions and whether or not the materials were overcrowded or had difficult access; and re-usability of storage equipment.

Following the second site visit, the consultants developed a matrix of space attributes to be cross-referenced with a matrix of collections needs. This will set the ground for a planning of space re-allocation, that was developed prior to the final site visit on May 3, 2011. To this end, Henry's office prepared floor plans of the museum spaces for both buildings, derived from dimensions shown on drawings from previous construction projects.

Final discussion and presentation: May 3, 2011

This meeting provided the opportunity for the consultants to present and discuss their recommendations, and to take questions from Museums staff and Art Conservation faculty and students. Feedback from the staff was essential to formulation of the final report, submitted to the University Museums on July 26, 2011.

What might have been done differently?

The one deviation from the original proposal was the level of student involvement. To be sure, students from Art Conservation and one graduate student from art history participated. Student involvement included:

- Assessment of the spatial, environmental and architectural attributes of selected collections spaces (October site visit);
- Measurement of the spatial dimensions of collections and collections housings, and development of spatial requirements for selected stored collections (January site visit);
- Assessment of the physical and environmental vulnerabilities of collections materials (January site visit);
- Attendance and participation in two meetings/workshops with the consultants and the University Museums staff.

Art Conservation faculty was greatly supportive of the actual experience offered to their students. But our initial proposal aspired to an even wider student involvement, to include "...museum studies, historic preservation, energy and engineering by leading a pilot 3-credit course focused on museum environmental control and collection assessment. (This course will be funded by the University.) There would also be the opportunity for art conservation and other students across campus to develop independent study projects on topics related to either of these areas, building on lectures and coursework in sustainable environmental management."

One reason this aspect was not better developed was the time frame for the grant. To be sure, the 9-month time frame was sufficient to complete the consultancy and the report. But the time frame did not serve the academic world or calendar well. Notification of funding was granted in June, by which time many faculty are no longer on campus, and fall course offerings are already set. If we were to re-apply for a program to involve students, I would hope to build in a three to six month planning period for engaging faculty, and, by extension, students.

Accomplishments

The main goal of the project was achieved. The final report provides a vital point of departure for improvement of storage and care of the University Museums collections. Its main recommendations pertain to 1) the redistribution of collections in storage according to material

type, value and category among four existing storage areas; 2) relocation of staff offices to free up space for the creation of a large storage space in Old College; 3) reconfiguration of shipping/receiving and general storage spaces in Old College.

Next steps

The continuation of this project will be multi-phased, and will be discussed here in order of projected implementation. The implementation of the recommendations made is gradual due to a common problem of university museums: the small size of the staff (6.5; with one curator on leave to July 1, 2012). Those most involved are the Director (who also serves as Curator of the Old College Gallery); the Curator of Collections (who fulfills the duties of Collections Manager) and the Preparator (who serves as liaison with University Facilities).

Fall 2011: Completion of the transfer of works on paper in the Permanent Collection from storage in Old College to storage in the Mechanical Hall print study room.

Fall 2011: Work with facilities to see to what extent facilities can be improved to meet the environmental recommendations.

Fall 2011: Presentation of Collections Plan to UD Collections Committee. Once approved, move ahead on review of collection and the de-accession of works no longer relevant to the mission (2007).

2012: Move ahead with review of collections and de-accessions.

2012: Move preparator's office from Old College to Mechanical Hall; if funding permits, move Student coordinator to a newly designated office space adjacent to the gallery.

Spring 2013: Having honed the collection; re-located staff to open up collections storage space get bids for recommended storage furniture.

Fall 2013: Submit proposal for funding to support purchase of furniture and renovation of Old College collections storage area.

A key element of the University Museums' Strategic Plan (2008) is enhancing the capacity of the University of Delaware as a collecting institution. In 2010, the University Museums complete the first long-term installation of the University Art Collection in a newly renovated Old College Gallery. We continue to seek to build the collection, to enhance its focus on American art (1880 to the present), but not to the exclusion of other objects of quality that serve the University curriculum. The availability of state of the art storage space not only protects our collection, but expands our capacity to grow the collection.

